

## M. FRANCES STREITEL

### WITNESS OF THE YOUTH OF THE CHURCH AND OF THE “FUTURE WORLD”

(*Spirituality and Understanding of the Christologic Mystery in Mary Frances of the Cross Streitel*)

#### 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

« I would never permit myself to lead a soul entrusted to me on ways on which I was led, without a special sign from above. I would even ask a very eloquent sign for this, for I often wondered ... that I did not thereby lose a straight direction toward God, a deeper penetration into God, together with my sound mind.»<sup>2</sup>

These quite singular words have to be considered a simple, yet effective synthesis of the life and of the articulated experience of Mary Frances of the Cross (Amalia Streitel). Some brief notes about her spirituality will help us understand these expressions. They will also introduce us to her personal way of *Sequela Christi*, based on the following of the evangelical message that she lived in her historic and ecclesiastic context.

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<sup>1</sup> The starting point of this research is the *Corpus* of Frances Streitel’s autobiographic writings which is divided into four volumes:

MARY FRANCES OF THE CROSS/AMALIA STREITEL, *Letters to Father John Francis Jordan 1883-1885*, Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother, Rome 2000; Id., *Letters to her Parents and her Sister Hedwig 1855-1911*, Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother, Rome 2002; Id., *Letters to Various Correspondents 1879-1910*, Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother, Rome 2005; Id., *Various Writings and Documents of the Beginning of the Congregation 1883-1911*, Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother, Rome 2007.

\*English Titles/Abbreviations:

*Letters to Various Correspondents 1879-1910*, Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother, Rome 2005.

*Letters to Father John Francis Jordan 1883-1885*, Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother, Rome 2000.

*Letters to her Parents and her Sister Edwige 1855-1911*, Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother, Rome 2007

*Various Writings and Documents of the Beginning of the Congregation 1883-1911*, Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother, Rome 2007.

*Novissima Positio= SACRA CONGREGATIO DE CAUSIS SANCTORUM, Nepesina seuHerbipolen. Beatificationis et canonizationis servae Dei Maria Franciscae a Cruce. Novissima Positio super vita, virtutibus et fama sanctitatis*, 3 voll., Roma 2003-2004.

Ibid= *Ibidem*

ID.= *Idem*

p.= Page,

pp. = Pages

par.= Paragraph

<sup>2</sup>Letter of M. Frances of the Cross to Fr. Jordan, March 31,1883, p. 100, par. 7.

## **2. The Christologic Event and the Vocation of M. Frances of the Cross**

The spiritual journey of M. Frances Streitel unfolds in the light of an evangelic horizon. In her daily life, she measured herself with Christ's mystery as revealed in the Sacred Scripture and in the Church. For many reasons, it is of course not easy to outline a faithful report about her interior life: we do not have that many of her writings, and they were written occasionally so that we cannot systematize anything, and, last but not least, of her vocational journey was complex.

Her human and spiritual experience was full of unforeseen events and inner struggles that will lead her to an unexpected change of plans always guided by a divine project, the logic of which would only become clear little by little with the passage of time. However, her strong will to obey only God in order to follow Christ in any circumstance and without confusion, led her personality to concentrate on certain essential aspects of the Gospel. This obediential perseverance that guided her towards the *Sequela Christi* in accordance with the Franciscan ideal, allows us to read her spiritual experience based on some recurring fundamental concepts that can be found in the historical unfolding of her religious vocation.

The texts from which we gain the most information possible about her charism, her spirituality, and her way of following in Christ's footsteps are the letters that she sent to different people. For our research, the most interesting letters are those sent to Fr. John Francis Jordan, founder of the *Society of the Divine Savior*. In 1883, this German priest asked M. Frances to come to Rome to found the female branch of his new foundation, which at that time was called *Catholic Teaching Society*. Of all the letters she wrote, we still have 101 of them that witness the inner world of Frances of the Cross, her vocational journey, the *sequela Christi* that she lived with her sisters, and her expectations about the new foundation. Although these two founders' paths split quite soon, these letters witness M. Frances' genuine intention to follow Christ Crucified. In fact, she wanted to live her mission in accordance with the ideal she had had in mind since the vision she had at the Carmel, that is to unite the active life with the contemplative life. Moreover, the letters point out how the profoundness of St. Francis of Assisi and his way to imitate Christ, together with the ideals of the Carmel, become for her a *medium* necessary to realize her vocation.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Here is a list of available biographies through which it is possible to know more about Frances Streitel, foundress of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis of Assisi : REV. AQUILIN REICHERT, *Mother Frances Streitel. Her Life and her Work*; M. C. KOLLER, *Walk in Love. Life of Mother Mary Frances Streitel Foundress of the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother*, Franciscan Herald Press, Chicago (Illinois)

For the purposes of this research, it was useful to consider both the letters and the witness of some sisters as well as of people who knew her. These witnesses are collected in the *Novissima Positio super vita, virtutibus et fama sanctitatis* written for the beatification. Such statements have helped us complete and understand M. Frances' spiritual image which is more articulated than the one described in some of her biographies.

### **3. God's Love Experienced in Jesus Christ**

All along her vocational and existential journey, Mother Frances Streitel had the opportunity to experience God's love that permeated her whole life. We would like to consider more deeply some aspects among the most meaningful of her spiritual personality. In this way, we will be able to understand why this religious woman who lived at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was so important for the Church as well as for men and women of our times. In fact, we will see that her experience was a service imbued with love for Christ, totally devoted to others.

M. Frances of the Cross was a Christian person who radically lived the evangelical message. Through her, the Holy Spirit made God's Kingdom present, making her life a mirror of Christ's sanctity and God's love for the world. We are talking about that love which is the heart of our Christian faith, and identifies itself in the person of Christ of Nazareth, the only One who can radically change men's lives<sup>4</sup>.

Experiencing this love, M. Frances approached the divine life's essence which is love, as we read in the first Letter of John; *God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him* (1 Jn 4:16). To this love M. Frances wanted to consecrate her entire life. Her dedication was a constant effort to witness the divine love personified in God's incarnate Son which manifests the dimension of communion and mercy as God's essence. In this complete self-giving, M. Frances found her vocation, her task, her destiny, finding in the *Sequela Christi* the answer to that sense which exists in every human being's heart.

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1980: En.Trans., *Franciscan Vision. Life of Mother Frances Streitel Foundress of the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother*, Revised by T. M. MUELLER, Éditions du Signe, Strasbourg (France) 2004; SUORE DELLA SS.M. MADRE ADDOLORATA, *Mother Frances Streitel Foundress of the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother*, Éditions du Signe, Strasbourg (France) 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Speaking of this, Cardinal Giacomo Biffi underlines in his catechesis that one can hardly fall in love with a philosophical or mathematical argument because it does not change one's life, it does not give full sense to our existence. See F.G. BRAMBILLA, Prefazione, in G. CORINI, *Educati all'amore. Itinerario biblico*, Paoline, Milano 2011, 5.

Analyzing M. Frances' writings, we did find out that her spiritual journey and her seeking for a full communion with Christ does not come from an intellectual elaboration, but from a daily experience of the Christologic event, from a constant spiritual contact with a well-defined *Face*, Jesus Christ's, in the expression of His love, His sacrifice, His mystery of death and resurrection. The incarnation, death and resurrection of the Son of God are mysteries through which M. Frances made God's love her own, giving it to her neighbor through acts of fraternity and love.

Her encounter with Christ was not just ideal or superficial. It led M. Frances to live an intense spiritual life, totally submissive to the Holy Spirit and to the obedience of the Church. Her priorities were listening to the Gospel, participating in the celebration of the liturgy and of the sacraments. She responded to these priorities with a deep love for the Eucharist, Christologic devotions, imitation of the saints, and veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary. All of these manifestations of her personality led her more and more to the personal encounter with the Redeemer of her own life and of the world. Her communion with Christ showed mainly through her obedience to the salvific economy which manifests itself through the *kenosis* of the Redeemer that starts with the Incarnation, through His passion, death, and Resurrection.

M. Frances understood incontrovertibly that Jesus Christ meets every person's expectations, even the one who is far away from God because God's Only Begotten Son is the center of everyone's existence.

Such an intuition came from her personal experience. In fact, Frances of the Cross did experience in her own existence that Christ makes each person whole, as absolute and final reality in which human freedom finds its fulfillment. This truth made M. France aware that giving her life was her only convenient answer very thankful for God's love. Therefore, the decision to manifest in her life the full communion with Christ was nothing else than her way to follow the divine project. Her whole spirit aimed to assimilate the Word of the Gospel in order to take part in the salvation project of the Redeemer, sharing His mission marked by the obedience to the Father.

M. Frances' letters make us clearly understand that her journey towards Christ came from God's grace but was also the outcome of an intense commitment, of a constant *inner struggle* and a daily *conquest*<sup>5</sup>. Her soul was continuously engaged in the process of conversion, purification, and

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<sup>5</sup>See CARD. C. CACCIA DOMINIONI, *Preface*, in REV. AQUILIN REICHERT, *Mother Frances Streitel. Her Life and her Work*,

inner improvement to grow in Christ and reflect in Him every dimension of her person. The constant union with God's transforming grace, made her a new person, far away from any compromise with sin.

M. Frances, with her beautiful and fluent style, described the experience of the metamorphosis of her humanity into Christ as a *resurrection from the heart of the Redeemer*.

«I shall fervently and sincerely pray to my Crucified Love to annihilate me and let me arise in the Wound of the Sacred Heart. He should let me die to all that is not of God and to live, suffer, and operate only in Him, the Source of all good.»<sup>6</sup>

In this way, she took the step absolutely indispensable for every true disciple: her soul embraced and let itself be transformed by *God's Kingdom* that comes. After her encounter with Christ, her fundamental rule was the statement: *God and His will above all things*. For this reason, she lived the experience of God and His love with deep availability to gradually accept God's plan for her which led her to found a new congregation in accordance with the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi, thus experiencing at the same time the constant presence of God and His Spirit together with the fragility of sinful nature.

Thanks to this more and more radical obedience, she made herself available to the action of the Spirit, modeling her activity, her personality, her opinions, her conception of the world, and even her way of serving God to the divine project. In fact, the events of her life witness a gradually refining of her sensitivity, thanks to the obedience which demands a complete purification of the soul in order to understand better and better God's plan about the new foundation. Therefore, to carry out God's will meant for Frances of the Cross to accomplish great changes, and new commitment ruled by the Word of the Gospel. This was a journey, a mission which often led her to accept the ministry of authority, thus having to leave the *last place* towards which the *imitatio Christi* constantly called her.

«[...] This morning I received much light about this: that when the Lord has definitely spoken through His representative, one should accept the assigned office in humility and silence, at the same time keeping in mind one's

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<sup>6</sup> M. Frances Streitel to Msgr. Anton De Waal, March 30, 1885, p. 180, par. 3.

unworthiness, and not always try to get rid of the office, a sign also of greatest imperfection.»<sup>7</sup>

Obedience constantly led her towards a new planning of her life in accordance with the meaning of love, which meant to open up her heart and her mind in order to treasure the Word of God and assume its content radically<sup>8</sup>. The goal of this inner journey was indicated to her by grace: to incarnate the virtue of the holy humanity of God's Son, to cooperate with His mission as a witness radiating His presence.

In M. Frances, the dimension of *metanoia* can be considered one of the most important aspects of her ascetic journey, thanks to which, always guided by her union with God, she experienced God's grace flowing in the human heart. To the fire of God's love, Frances of the Cross sacrificed all her self-love and her flaws because grace made her *very similar* to Christ: poor, sweet, meek, and humble of heart

The transformation of her inner existence in the light of God's Word upon which M. Frances meditated persistently, led her to embrace the “*foolishness of the Cross*”<sup>9</sup>. To such foolishness look those who *have rejected the wisdom of this world*.

#### **4. In the Sign of the Incarnation and Passion of the Lord Jesus Christ**

As we understand from what has been stated above, M. Frances' spirituality developed in an organic and precise way around an evangelical fact: the Cross. She constantly looked at the Paschal Mystery that she considered in its wholeness: from the *humbleness* of the Incarnate Word, that is, when Jesus emptied Himself to submit Himself to human fragility until the suffering, passion, and crucifixion because of *our salvation (pro nobis)*. M. Frances directed her attention exactly to this

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<sup>7</sup>Letter of M. Frances of the Cross to Fr. John Francis Jordan, March 27, 1883, p. 91, par. 2. See also Letter of M. Frances of the Cross to Fr. Jordan, April 10, 1883, p. 108, par. 3: «The priest of God gave me his judgment so calmly and clearly. On the one hand, I could give consideration to my inclinations insofar as they would draw me away from sin and the world. On the other hand, I must allow myself to be so guided by holy obedience as not to hesitate to sacrifice all my inclinations to it».

<sup>8</sup> M. Frances' attitude explicitly refers to St. Francis of Assisi whom she had taken as example of love for Jesus and the Church.

<sup>9</sup> «For Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.» 1Cor 1:22-25.

“self-immolation” of the Son of God descended into the world to obey His Father’s salvific plan until He gave Himself for us.

M. Frances’ writings are extremely rich in Christological references. They contemplate the mysteries of the life of Christ from different angles: in His earthly reality, in His obedience, in His Incarnation, passion, humiliation of the Cross, in His Resurrection<sup>10</sup>, in the Eucharist<sup>11</sup>, in the Church, and in the heart of every man recreated by God<sup>12</sup>.

On certain occasions, she communicated her own reflections to the people to whom she sent her letters, trying to express her experience of the mystery of God starting from Christ. In these communications she used different literary styles that go from prayer of praise to exhortation; from manifesting her feelings to her vision of the ecclesiastical body, or the description of human condition and the world. Her final goal, however, was to give glory to God and witness His salvific love and his presence in the world. For this reason, every dimension of her *life in Christ* was necessarily lived as opening to God for the good of the *ecclesiastical body*, far away from an individualist point of view.

«Crib and Cross are meant to be presented once more in their worth to the present generation. New springs of grace will be conducted to mankind through souls who are closely united to the Lord by poverty and love of the Cross in order to refresh them with the waters of salvation»<sup>13</sup> (See Is 12:3)

M. Frances of the Cross, attracted by the mystery of the Incarnate Word, described in her letters with deep sensitivity some aspects of the Trinitarian relations that she borrowed from her reflections on the Gospels: the relations of the Father with the Son in His earthly mission; the communion with the Holy Spirit and the love for the redeemed mankind. In her attempt to understand better the intimate and mysterious relation among the three Divine Persons revealed by

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<sup>10</sup>The dimension of the Resurrection is included in the Paschal Mystery. That is why the term does not recur often. The word *joy*, on the other hand, comes up very frequently, around 116 times in her writings.

<sup>11</sup> The references to the Eucharistic Mystery are very many in her writings, as well as the witnesses of her strong devotion to the Blessed Sacrament.

<sup>12</sup> Letter of M. Frances of the Cross to Fr. Jordan, December 4, 1883, p. 190, par. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Letter of M. Frances of the Cross to Fr. Jordan, April 10, 1884, p. 257, par. 3. These words express the Christian concept according to which the souls who are united to Christ become sources of grace for others.

the Redeemer in His salvific plan, M. Frances kept in mind in a creative way the different titles given to Christ by the Church in its centuries-old tradition.

Here are some of these names taken directly from her letters. When talking about Christ in His relation with the Father, the Spirit and the unity of the three in the divine essence, M. Frances called Him: Son of God<sup>14</sup>, Infant Jesus, Word made Flesh<sup>15</sup>, the Lamb<sup>16</sup>, and God-Man<sup>17</sup>. When writing about Him in relation to mankind, she called Him: *The divine Master Builder*<sup>18</sup>, *our Way to Christ*<sup>19</sup> (from whom one should never walk away), *that Powerful, living God*<sup>20</sup>, *eternal Overseer*<sup>21</sup>, *Christ, the poor, the little Christ*<sup>22</sup> (with a clear reference to the Incarnation and to the Cross), *the Bridegroom*<sup>23</sup>, *the God of my heart*<sup>24</sup>, *our Crucified Love*<sup>25</sup>, *Him who will be her portion for time and eternity*<sup>26</sup>.

As we notice, M. Frances' spirituality has clear Christocentric implications<sup>27</sup>. Her existence constantly communicated, mystically, to Christ's life and sufferings. In fact, since the beginning of her spiritual experience she had had great consideration for the human aspects of the Redeemer,

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<sup>14</sup> Letter of M. Frances of the Cross to Fr. Jordan, March 25, 1883, p. 89, par. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Letter of M. Frances of the Cross to Fr. Jordan, December 25, 1884, p. 262, par. 1-2.

<sup>16</sup> Letter of M. Frances of the Cross to Fr. Jordan, March 18, 1883, p. 84, par. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Letter of M. Frances of the Cross to Fr. Jordan, April 10, 1884, p. 257, par. 3. (In this case, M. Frances contemplates the hypostatic union in the person of the Divine Word starting from the wounds of the Passion).

<sup>18</sup> Letter of M. Frances of the Cross to Fr. Jordan, July 12, 1883, p. 124, par. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Letter of M. Frances of the Cross to Fr. Jordan, January 1, 1884, p. 226, par. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Letter of M. Frances of the Cross to Fr. Jordan, September 2, 1883, p. 144, par. 3.

<sup>21</sup> Letter of M. Frances of the Cross to Fr. Jordan, November 13, 1883, p. 173, par. 2. See Mt 13:55; Mk 6:3. (Jesus is mentioned here in a figurative sense as *He who files*, smoothes, and gives new light to the souls called by God to prepare His way). See, Letter of M. F. Streitel Giovanni Francesco Jordan, April 11, 1884, pp. 256-257, par. 2. (See Is 40:3; Mt 3:3; Mk 1:76; Lk 1:76; 3, 4); Letter of M. Frances of the Cross to Fr. Jordan, December 5, 1883, p. 194, footnote 12; Letter of M. Frances of the Cross to Fr. Jordan, December 22, 1883, p. 211, footnote 21.

<sup>22</sup> Letter of M. Frances of the Cross to Fr. Jordan, December 23, 1883, p. 212, par. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Letter of M. Frances of the Cross to Fr. Jordan, March 25, 1883, p. 89, par. 3.

<sup>24</sup> Letter of M. Frances of the Cross to Fr. Jordan, March 18, 1883, p. 80, par. 1. In this expression, there is a clear reference to the *Song of Songs*.

<sup>25</sup> Letter of M. Frances of the Cross to F. Jordan, March 28, 1884, p. 255, par. 5. These last names clearly show a spousal dimension in her spirituality, that is also present in St. Clare and St. Francis of Assisi.

<sup>26</sup> Norms by M. F. Streitel, June 1883, p. 50, norm 103, par. 2. In this case, M. Frances used a periphrasis to express that Christ is *alpha* and *omega*. The definition *Norms* for some writings of the span of time 1883-1911, is given by Fr. Aquilino Reichert, O.F.M. Conv. (1889-1968), first postulator of the Cause for Beatification of the Servant of God Mother Frances Streitel.

<sup>27</sup> However, by Christocentric qualification it is only meant to notice that Christ has a special place in M. Frances' spirituality; it is not meant to deny a direct reference also to the Trinitarian mystery of the Father and the Holy Spirit.

reflecting on them from a Trinitarian and salvific perspective, an attitude that was already typical of St. Francis of Assisi<sup>28</sup>.

«[...] In the wounds of the Lord may there be all our hope, but we shall not underrate the wounds of the saints since they are a continuation of the wounds of the Redeemer; they are the most sublime union of love with God of their souls and in them is shown clearly their “transformation into Christ”»<sup>29</sup>

#### 4.1. Love for the *Holy Humanity* of Christ, “Sign of the Times” for the Modern Church

This last aspect of M. Frances’ experience is to be considered in a historical and ecclesiastical context, without minimizing the charismatic and inspirational aspect of her vocation<sup>30</sup>. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the veneration of Christ’s humanity belonged to the *signs of the times*. In fact, M. Frances lived her vocational experience in a century characterized by a rising biblism and by a Catholic Church struggling to bring back the Christ of the Gospels, trying to “rebuild” the true Jesus of the Bible in order to replace the false “Jesus” who had become fashionable among philosophers and scholars of that century<sup>31</sup>.

At that time, one of the Church’s priorities was to underline Jesus’ historical reality to the faithful. For this reason, Jesus was many times pictured as a child, a young boy, a man taking care of daily matters, as *Good Shepherd* with infinite mercy, as the Redeemer in His passion and death. The outcome of such preaching was a growing “Christocentric” devotion among the Christian

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<sup>28</sup>Tuttavia, come afferma L. Iriarte, che san Francesco «non fu l'iniziatore di questa pietà basata sugli aspetti umani del Redentore. Prima di Lui l'abbiamo testimoniata in san Bernardo e i maestri della scuola di san Vittore, che la espressero nelle loro esperienze mistiche. Ma con lui irrompe il soggettivismo umanistico, facendo vibrare di nuovo fervore religioso quella società ansiosa di affermare se stessa in tutte le manifestazioni umane». See L. IRIARTE, *Vocazione francescana. Sintesi degli ideali di san Francesco e santa Chiara*, EDB, Bologna 2006<sup>4</sup>, 60.

<sup>29</sup>Letter of M. Frances of the Cross to Fr. Jordan, December 1883, p. 206, par. 5

<sup>30</sup> See Letter of M. Frances of the Cross to Fr. Jordan, December 1883, pp. 219-220, par. 3: « Now let me make one request in favor of our mutual Love, in favor of our Sacramental God. Reverend Father, would you not like to promise this God in the form of Bread, that as soon as He has taken place in the midst of your spiritual daughters, one of the them will stand guard with Him by day and night, in such a way that every hour will be dedicated to another mystery of the Incarnate Love, somewhat like this: in one hour the Precious Blood, in a second one, the Sacred Heart, and in a third, the wounds of the Savior will be venerated in a special way. I had never thought about such a thing, [...] I am firmly convinced that in this manner the work of the Brothers and Sisters of our Society will have the special grace to do many and great things for the spread and renewal of the reign of Christ on earth». Le parole di M. Francesca sul fatto di non aver mai pensato cose simili, ci ricordano quando H.U. von Balthasar dice sull’adorazione: «*L’adorazione non è un atto libero, cui la creatura si decide in base ad una riflessione. Essa s’impose nel momento in cui l’amore eterno, nel suo misterioso andare verso gli uomini, si lascia intravvedere nella sua ineffabile presenza*». ID., *Elisabetta della Trinità. La dottrina spirituale*, Ancora, Milano, 90

<sup>31</sup> See E. R.ENAN, *La Vie de Jésus* (1863), Trad. it. *Vita di Gesù*, Rizzoli, Milano 1992

faithful, as we can also see in M. Frances and her sisters. In these devotions, the Christians honored all the mysteries of the Lord's earthly life. That is why in the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was a great deal of devotions, such as those to the *Child Jesus* (M. Frances' favorite since she was a child), to the *Holy Family*, to the *Good Shepherd*, to the *Holy Face* (popular especially in France), to the *Most Precious Blood*, etc. In the nineteenth-century spirituality, it was also important to trust the *Providence of Merciful Jesus*.

In this way, the Church was able to lead the faithful to a spiritual attitude in strong opposition to *Rationalism* and *Protestantism*<sup>32</sup>.

## 5. *The “Seal of Christ” on Humanity and on the World*

If we wish to know more about the way M. Frances experienced her particular communion with Christ, we have to consider her special attraction to salvific mystery of the Redemption. It is such a strong attraction that she read every event of her life as a *sacrament* of God's Presence, and as an access to this mystery that she felt like sharing by accepting the *transforming* grace of Christ.

The terminology that M. Frances used in her writings described radically the urgent necessity of experiencing a deep *configuration* to Christ. For this reason, in her letters she never talked about a superficial or indefinite imitation of Jesus, but the term “*imitatio*” (*nachahmen*), rather means *imitating the saints* in their love for Christ (for example Francis and Clare of Assisi<sup>33</sup>). In such a statement there is nothing strange because St. Paul himself asked the faithful to “be imitators of him” in expressing the love for Christ.

M. Frances, instead, preferred expressions that conveyed a Personal God who becomes “You” to every human being, especially to the soul who loves Him and to whom He asks to listen to and to welcome Him. M. Frances sometimes mentioned something about her personal, intimate, and radical call to the *sequela Crucis*. They are brief considerations written with the intention to tell her interlocutors the essence of discipleship, which, for her, consisted in constantly looking at the Redeemer in order to *follow* Him wherever He may go.

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<sup>32</sup> See L. BORRIELLO – G. DELLA CROCE – B. SECONDIN, *La spiritualità cristiana nell'età contemporanea*, Borla, Roma 1985, 86-94

<sup>33</sup> Letter of M. Frances of the Cross to Fr. Jordan, April 1883, p. 106, par. 3.

The use of the term “follow” in her letters is strictly connected to the “*foolishness of the Cross*”<sup>34</sup>. It is complemented with expressions that indicate the radical availability asked to the disciple (M. Frances) to let herself be molded so that a new creation is realized in her. This creation comes from Christ’s redeeming action. This concept is confirmed by some expressions that come up frequently in her letters and that sometimes she referred to herself, other times to her sisters or to some occasional interlocutor. These expression are: “*transformation into Christ*,” “*configuration to Christ*,” “*configuration to His Cross*,” “*resemblance to the prototype Christ*,” “*union of love with Christ*,” or “*union with His suffering to be united in His Resurrection*,” etc.

In the light of the Holy Spirit, Frances Streitel acknowledged and experienced in her life that *everything (humanity and the world) carried the seal of Christ and of the Cross*. Her very person is enlightened and transformed by the Cross in such a way that her only reason to live seemed to be the lengthening of the sacrifice of the Crucified:

«The Lord allows everything to shape itself into a cross, and the Cross with its five marks of love will finally be deeply impressed into the soul, so that resemblance to the prototype “Christ”<sup>35</sup>, and His true image St. Francis will not be wanting in death»<sup>36</sup>

Writing to Msgr. De Waal, M. Frances expressed this concept more clearly: «*The book from which I draw my spiritual exercises is the Cross*»<sup>37</sup>.

In the light of what said so far, we can state that her ideal of *missionary service* in religious life consisted in engaging concretely for the renewal of Christian, religious, and presbyteral life. She described her own task as *being at God’s disposal* so that every human being can be reborn in Christ by the Holy Spirit, and respond to the Father’s salvation. Since the Church renews herself in the perfection of the single person, M. Frances considered the conversion the most appropriate way to become witness *similar* to the Crucified for a benefit to the whole body of the Church<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup> Letter of M. Frances of the Cross to Fr. Jordan, January 28, 1884, p. 242 par. 3.

<sup>35</sup> M. Francesca esprime il senso dell’essere conformi all’immagine del Figlio Unigenito del Padre. See Rm 8:29

<sup>36</sup> Letter of M. Frances of the Cross to Fr. Jordan, del 12-7-1883, p. 123, par. 2.

<sup>37</sup> Letter of M. Frances Streitel to Msgr. Anton De Waal, March 30, 1885, p. 180, par. 3. La serva di Dio scriverà ancora a P. Jordan: «The great seraphic Father would have no singular joy were he to see his imitators, that is, those who have the courage to follow him and his admirable daughter, St. Clare, living constantly at rest and in peace. NO! We, too, desire like our holy Father and St. Clare to embrace the Cross with love and joy and to seek all our delight in being deemed worthy to suffer for so good a God.». Letter of M. Petra to Fr. Jordan, February 1883, p. 44, par. 1.

<sup>38</sup> «Il rinnovamento spirituale non è un affare intimistico, ma coinvolge tutta quanta la realtà della Chiesa. [...] Il rinnovamento spirituale, dunque ha un risvolto di Chiesa: come il peccato danneggia il corpo in tutte le sue parti, così la

Nonetheless, M. Frances was clearly aware that to be fully conformed to Christ was a gift from supernatural grace given to those who accept to be molded by God in order to be part of the great salvific plan.

«My Father, let us not stop asking the Lord to transform us into Himself and to form us in His image as a savior<sup>39</sup>, with His wounds, His pains, and His cross.»<sup>40</sup>

### 5.1 The Cross as a Mystery of Love and Pain in Opposition to the Sin of the World

In the Crucifix, M. Frances saw the salvific plan unfold in opposition to the sin of the world, and as an offer of the Divine filiation (in Christ the man becomes Son of God). With the help coming from the grace, M. Frances felt called to incarnate the mystery of *love and pain* manifested by the Cross in which love itself is the substance of the Divine pain. For this reason, she lived her vocation as a constant seeking for the communion with God, rejecting sin radically through the struggle against all that in her human nature was not oriented to the good or to a true conversion. On the other hand, since the multiform grace of God manifests in strict collaboration with the person, M. Frances committed to live in a special manner *obedience, humility, poverty, and self-denial*.

The spiritual struggle that she endured with such firmness reminds of some attitudes nurtured in the tradition of the Carmelite spirituality which M. Frances knew and lived during her time at the Carmel of *Himmelsporten*<sup>41</sup>. In fact, the *Carmelite Charism* conceives the spiritual life mainly as a “struggle,” an obedient submission to the Paschal dynamic of death and Resurrection<sup>42</sup>.

In her letters, M. Frances introduced this necessary struggle of the faith comparing herself and her sisters to the character of the *soldier in arms*, quite often using the military language already

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grazia fa sentire il suo benefico influsso. [...] La grazia di Cristo fluisce nella misura in cui lo Spirito di Dio è accolto dal credente» F. ASTI, *Teologia della vita mistica. Fondamenti, dinamiche e mezzi*, LEV, Città del Vaticano 2009, 255.

<sup>39</sup>M. Francesca era una assidua lettrice della Sacra Scrittura e spesso nei suoi scritti troviamo riferimenti esplicativi oppure indiretti alla Bibbia, come in questo caso: See Rm 8, 29; 2 Cor 5, 17; Col 1, 15; 3, 10.

<sup>40</sup>[Letter of M. Frances of the Cross to Fr. Jordan, December 1883, p. 215, par. 3.](#)

<sup>41</sup>«*I entered Carmel with the intention of serving the Lord there as perfectly as possible in seclusion and perfect obedience.*» Letter of M. Frances of the Cross to Fr. Jordan, March 31, 1883, p. 98, par. 3.

<sup>42</sup>CASTELLANO CERVERA J., *L'ascesi cristiana come evento pasquale*, in *Ascesi cristiana*, Pontificio Istituto di Spiritualità del Teresianum, Roma 1977, 285-303.

present in the Pauline Letters. She evoked the vigor of the *miles Christi*<sup>43</sup> through the idea of getting ready to battle a “strong fight” against the imperfections and the “unknown storms” caused by the spirit of the dark thus announcing God’s Kingdom, first of all in her own soul. M. Frances was well aware that for her whole life she would have been conducting a true spiritual struggle to fulfill her vocation. That is why she firmly wore “God’s armor” whose weapons are identified in the power of poverty, “well-equipped fortress” that surrounds the souls of the faithful “conquering them through the poor but devastating weapon, the holy Cross.”<sup>44</sup>

Because of this, M. Frances lived radically open to grace, in *humility, poverty, and obedience* that she considered ways to realize the right relationship with God and her neighbor. She thought these three virtues gave a pure gaze and freed one from every form of concupiscence. In a word, a true journey of conversion was, for M. Frances, the grateful response to Christ who had been merciful to her, loved, and redeemed her. To Him and His mission she sacrificed her freedom, her will, and every most intimate wish to lead to God all those that the Divine mercy entrusted to her, especially the sinners.

For God’s and neighbor’s love, she exerted a *certain form of violence* in order to become compliant to the Divine Word and to the immeasurable love of God. It was a battle guided by the Scripture from which she received comfort and clarity to interpret her life’s events. One day, thinking about the strong battle for God’s Kingdom that she was about to face, M. Frances said: “*From John the Baptist’s time until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence and the violent take it by force.*” (Mt 11:7-10.12)<sup>45</sup>

The spiritual battle that she fully actualized was an ascetic attitude well known in the Church tradition and practiced since the beginning by the believers. The Desert Fathers had it in high consideration and thought that the Christian is allowed to talk about “violence” only when it comes

<sup>43</sup> Come si nota con tale espressione M. Francesca non vuole incarnare un ideale cavalleresco, quello che talvolta il primo biografo di S. Francesco fa intravedere nella *sequela Christi* del Santo (anche se oggi viene contestata l’esagerazione che se ne è fatta), ciò che desidera è piuttosto introdurre un necessario atteggiamento ascetico.

<sup>44</sup> See Letter of M. Petra to Fr. Jordan, March 6, 1883, p. 60, par. 1. Riportiamo per esteso il brano che ci interessa: «*Holy poverty is a well-equipped fortress with strong resistance and valiant occupation. Hell could relate how it has caused poverty to brace sacrifices and battles, and still it has never been overpowered. Although cowards abandon this fortress to join the enemy, although a reprehensible peace has been concluded with the archenemy for a while, after such a disgraceful time, champions have come forward, who, fully arrayed in the armor of poverty, have once again openly opposed the archenemy of pride, sensuality, and their attendants..*” conquering them through the poor but devastating weapon, the holy Cross. May the Lord be glorified now, too--now, in a time when even the good hardly know the way of renunciation, and where in spite of enlightenment, darkness still reigns in the soul.» *Ibidem*.

<sup>45</sup> Letter of M. Frances of the Cross to Fr. Jordan, January 28, 1884, p. 242, par. 2.

to one's "I," and the goal is to grow spiritually. The Fathers thought that «the "fighter" discovers little by little that the battle is against something within him.» Therefore, the *fuga mundi* cannot be an escape from someone or something, but rather a battle against something that constantly dwells in the human being. The ascetic fight is against the evil that dwells in the mankind and leaves a mark<sup>46</sup>.

In her *Letters* M. Frances firmly stated that the Holy Spirit played a vital part in this battle. He is the One who really struggled in this inner fight so that the person can win the weakness of his or her own will and reach the purification of the actions against the Divine grace. In fact, such a battle makes sense only if it victoriously reaches the depth of human heart preparing it to welcome God's action.

The desire to contemplate the face of Christ thus rose from the core of her spiritual life. She appreciated the beauty of that face; both the hidden part belonging to the Suffering Servant of Yahweh, and the one radiating the light of the risen Christ. M. Frances's life witnessed that the Redeemer did not give her a mental image, a vague feeling or a romantic affection for His Divine Person, but the mystical experience of His own feelings of love and pain for fallen humanity. Her heart, in unison with Christ's heart, suffered for the sinners that needed salvation because they had lost God as center of their lives, their thoughts, their actions.

## **6. The Humble and Poor Word of the Cross**

It is important now to clarify what the virtues of *humility* and *poverty* meant to M. Frances. First of all, she considered them values related to a virtuous journey that, in the light of the Revelation, assumed for her a clear Christologic meaning because they manifest the Person of Christ in the dimension of His *kenosis*.

However, this intuition already belonged to the ecclesial reflection on the mystery of Christ. Since the Middle Ages, the Church has stated the communal relation between the *viator* man (pilgrim on earth), and the mysteries of Christ starting from the aspects of *poverty-humility* (see Francis of Assisi), and *littleness* (see the intuition of St. Therese of Lisieux in the 19<sup>th</sup> century). To St. Francis of Assisi, *humility* was not just a virtue or a quality of Christ, but the true Person of

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<sup>46</sup> See S. CHIALÀ, *La vita spirituale nei Padri del deserto*, Il pozzo di Giacobbe, Trapani 2006, 27-29.

Christ in the movement of emptying Himself generated by the *kenosis* of the *Incarnation*, of the *Passion*, and of the *Eucharist*<sup>47</sup>.

It is in this light that we notice the strong common feeling between M. Frances' spiritual experience and the Franciscan understanding of the *humility* related to the Christologic kenosis<sup>48</sup>.

M. Frances was strongly willing to mold her own life in accordance with the Christologic mystery, seeing deeply into the events of Incarnation, redeeming Passion of the Lord, and Eucharist. As we have said, to reach this goal she undertook the traditional journey to perfection of the Church which entailed being open to the Spirit's grace, performing a radical inner purification, and being obedient to the Word of God. M. Frances caught all the multi-faceted nuances of the economy of Redemption through a zealous meditation on the mysteries of Christ's life, especially the mysteries of the Incarnation, of Jesus' childhood, of the Divine filiation of the Incarnate Word, the mysteries

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<sup>47</sup> See C. CARGNONI, *Umiltà, umiliazione* in *Dizionario Francescano*, Edizioni Messaggero Padova, 1983, coll. 1871-1874

<sup>48</sup> Probabilmente la Streitel aveva avuto accesso alle fonti agiografiche francescane, pensiamo in particolare alla *Vita Beati Francisci* meglio conosciuta come *Legenda Maior* di San Bonaventura. In cui è presente (nella prima parte) il tema centrale della grazia misericordiosa di Dio, che si fa presente nella storia attraverso il suo servo Francesco di Assisi, seguace ed immagine di Cristo crocifisso, inviato al mondo come esempio per la salvezza di tutti. In questi testi viene precisata l'azione della grazia in Francesco attraverso un forte contrasto tra la sua condizione umana e l'azione misericordiosa di Dio. Qui il Santo è anche segnalato come il «veramente poverello e pentito», sottolineando il suo amore per l'umiltà, (considerata dalla tradizione ascetica cristiana come il fondamento di tutte le altre virtù) e per l'obbedienza ad essa collegata. Entrambe le virtù sono considerate le espressioni più concrete dello spirito di annientamento che deve animare il vero discepolo di Cristo. Inoltre, in questa biografia è riportato un tema caro a M. Francesca, l'annientamento di Cristo quale fondamento dell'umiltà di cui Gesù stesso è il Maestro. Accanto a queste due virtù Bonaventura pone la povertà presentata come il fondamento di tutte le virtù, poiché questa possiede una radice cristologica, così scrive: «Tra gli altri doni della grazia che Francesco ricevette dal generoso Datore, meritò la singolare prerogativa di crescere nelle ricchezze della semplicità attraverso l'amore per l'altissima povertà. Vedendo l'uomo santo, che questa virtù intima amica del Figlio di Dio, era ormai ripudiata da quasi tutto il mondo, desiderò ardentemente sposarla amandola di eterno amore» (See *Leggenda Maggiore di San Bonaventura* VII, 1,1-2, in *Fonti Francescane. Scritti e biografie di San Francesco d'Assisi. Cronache e altre testimonianze del primo secolo francescano. Scritti e biografie di Santa Chiara d'Assisi*, Edizioni Messaggero Padova-Movimento Francescano, Assisi 1982<sup>3</sup>, 889). Anche questo modo di esprimere l'amore alla povertà si ritrova in modo estremamente simile nelle lettere di Francesca della Croce, dove ritroviamo citato proprio questo passo. Sebbene, questo passaggio della *Leggenda*, di fattischi rifaccia alla *Vita seconda di Tommaso da Celano*, tuttavia, per il modo di presentare la povertà, nel contesto di una rigorosa difesa di fronte a coloro che la disattendono, per la configurazione cristologica e per la presentazione unita alle virtù dell'umiltà e dell'obbedienza ci pare possa comunque essere derivato da Bonaventura. Infatti, la principale chiave ermeneutica della Leggenda Bonaventuriana è cristologica, perfettamente collegata alla visione di un Francesco come il più perfetto imitatore di Cristo. See F. URIBE, *Il Francesco di Bonaventura. Lettura della Leggenda Maggiore*, Edizioni Porziuncola, Assisi 2003, p. 25. 216. 512.

In relazione a quanto abbiamo argomentato riportiamo il seguente passaggio di una lettera a P. Jordan di M. Francesca: «*My Father, what battles your daughter fought for years for the sake of heaven's daughter, holy poverty, God alone knows. How I suffered when I saw the bride of the Lord belittled in the Father's won house (Franciscan). I was silent. In grief of soul I recommended the renewing of the love of poverty to the lover of this virtue. I was called and attracted, and I responded to this calling, this attraction, first by command of obedience. I practiced poverty, imperfectly as everything, but I wanted to practice it in the manner of my holy Father, St. Francis.* ». See Letter of M. Petra to Fr. Jordan, March 6, 1883, pp. 60-61, par. 2.

of the Passion, of the Crucified Christ's wounded body, and of the Eucharistic Heart of Jesus<sup>49</sup>. Her constant reflection on Christ, Suffering Servant and Son of the Father generated in her heart an intense attraction towards humility and poverty that she perceived as a condition for acquiring the same attitude and feeling by which Jesus saved us.

To undertake the journey towards conversion and transformation in Christ, she found the most important support in the Eucharist liturgy, in reading the Sacred Word, in prayer, in spiritual texts, in edifying meditation, and in the evangelical interpretation of her life events: joy, contradictions, challenges and sorrow. Her love for the Crucified Christ thus became wise knowledge of how to live in the Spirit, concentrating on poverty, self-denial (self-sacrifice), and on eliminating all that was not God.

In this manner, M. Frances showed through her life an incontrovertible theological and spiritual truth: knowledge of and union with God necessarily pass through the acceptance and the experience of Jesus Christ and the Word of the Cross<sup>50</sup>. Through her words she underlined that the enlightenment coming from the grace of the Crucified-Risen Christ is proportionate to the degree of humility and poverty achieved through the exercise of faith, hope, love, and a true sorrow for sins<sup>51</sup>. Therefore, M. Frances' self-giving found its full meaning in the light of the gift that mankind received from the Father: His Son. Her self-offering to God was always renewed through constant prayer thanks to which she could reach a high degree of penetration of the Divine mysteries. United with Christ and the Virgin Mary, she lived the contemplative dimension in her daily life, letting the Spirit mold her wishes and actions in accordance with God's will.

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<sup>49</sup> See F.M. LÈTHEL, *Il mistero dell'amore materno. Alla luce della venerabile Conception Cabrera de Armida e del Servo di Dio Monsignor Luis M. Martin*, Religiose della Croce del S.C. di Gesù, Roma 2010, 16.

<sup>50</sup> Ricordiamo qui le parole di Bonaventura da Bagnoregio (1217-1274): «Nessuno entra rettamente in Dio se non attraverso il Crocifisso» *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, Prol., 3. Ed. It. S. MARTIGNONI-O. TODISCO, Città Nuova, Roma 1995. Ed ancora: «Moriamo, dunque, ed entriamo nella caligine, imponiamo il silenzio alle sollecitudini, alle concupiscenze, ai fantasmi: transitiamo con Cristo Crocifisso da questo mondo al Padre, affinché, mostrato a noi il Padre, diciamo con Filippo: ci basta» *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, VII, 6.

<sup>51</sup> A prova che certe esperienze non hanno epoca, ma dipendono dall'effusione dello Spirito Santo nel cuore dei fedeli e segnano la loro appartenenza a Cristo, riportiamo delle espressioni di Chiara Lubich, figura di spicco nella spiritualità contemporanea. Ella afferma: «Virtù che unisce l'anima a Dio...è l'umiltà, l'annientamento: Il più piccolo neo di umano che non si lasci assumere dal divino, rompe l'unità con gravi conseguenze. L'unità dell'anima con Dio che ha in sé, presuppone l'annullamento totale, l'umiltà più eroica... L'unità con le altre anime, si raggiunge ancora, per mezzo dell'umiltà: aspirare costantemente al "primato" col mettersi il più possibile al servizio del prossimo. Ogni anima che vuol realizzare l'unità deve avere un solo diritto: servire tutti perché in tutti serve Dio...Come s. Paolo da liberi farsi servi di tutti per guadagnare a Cristo il maggior numero (See 1 Cor 9,19)» L. LUBICH, *La dottrina spirituale di Chiara Lubich*, Città Nuova, Roma 2009<sup>2</sup>, 54-55.

The practice of poverty<sup>52</sup> (considered the mother of all virtues) and of humility led M. Frances to live her life as an extension of the mystery of Christ's poverty and humility:

«Grace taught her two prayers: the one, “Lord, annihilate me beneath Your feet and let me in turn be raised up in Your most Sacred Heart”<sup>53</sup>, the other, “Lord, I wish to have a thousand lives in order to surrender them all to You in unspeakable tortures.” The fruit of these prayers was an increase of love of God and of neighbor which was intimately united with love of holy poverty. Say to me whatever you like in regard to this last-named virtue. As soon as the word “poverty” sounds in my ear, my whole being, experiences holy joy. [...] Who is truly poor is also humble and obedient. I call poverty the mother of religious virtues.»<sup>54</sup>

## 6.1 The Poor as Dwelling-place of the Crucified Christ

Experiencing this communion of love with the Redeemer, she wanted everything in her to be in the image of Christ poor and obedient , even her will (“poor in will”)<sup>55</sup>, to fully share His mission<sup>56</sup>. M. Frances did not put any limitation to her self-giving, no restrictions, conditions or reserve. Her only intention was to respond to the Word of the Gospel through a constant practice of humility , poverty, and obedience<sup>57</sup>, to love the Father and the neighbor, especially the sinners, as Jesus did. Her love for the poor, the sufferers, the humble marked indelibly the journey of her spiritual life. She acknowledged them as those in whom God dwelt, and those who showed most clearly the poverty of the Incarnate Son. Remembering the time when she entered the Carmel, she wrote:

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<sup>52</sup> Il riferimento alla povertà ha spesso anche una connotazione sponsale nei suoi scritti, abitualmente viene chiamata da M. Francesca: *Bride of the Lord, Bride of the Father, Bride of Heaven*.

<sup>53</sup> See Fil 2, 8-9

<sup>54</sup> Letter of M. Petra to Fr. Jordan, February 18, 1883, p. 33-34, par. 3.

<sup>55</sup> «My Father, it is a great grace to be able to be “poor in will.” I can say I have never found such a surplus of will as in souls who roughly persist in external works of penance and who, at the same time, are attached to and stubbornly cling to very base things and to their more often very limited imagination.» See Letter of M. Frances of the Cross to Fr. Jordan, September 1883, p. 146, par. 1. (These expressions can be compared with those of St. Teresa of Avila in *The Way of Perfection*, 39,3 and in *The Interior Castle*, the fourth Mansion, 11 (Ed. Postulazione Generale dei Carmelitani, Roma 1985).

<sup>56</sup> Se desideriamo fare un raffronto con i mistici Carmelitani, basterà vedere quanto Benedetta della Croce (Edith Stein), per il IV centenario di San Giovanni della Croce (1542-1942), scrive nella sua opera di commento alla dottrina ed alla Spiritualità del mistico. In *Scientia crucis* (Edizioni OCD, Roma Morena 2003), riporta come il santo ha compreso l'unione con Cristo: «Se vuole avere parte alla sua vita [di Cristo], deve passare con lui attraverso la morte di croce: come lui crocifiggere la propria natura con una vita di mortificazione, di autorinnegamento ed abbandonarsi alla crocifissione nella sofferenza e nella morte, come Dio disporrà e consentirà. Quanto più perfetta sarà questa crocifissione, attiva e passiva, tanto più profonda sarà l'unione con il Crocifisso e tanto più ricca la partecipazione alla vita divina» ibidem, 34

<sup>57</sup> See Letter of M. Petra to Fr. Jordan, February/March 1883, p. 50, par. 1.

«I deeply loved the sick; therefore the Lord provided for the satisfaction of this tendency by often giving me very sick Sisters. I loved the poor; and these and the children made it difficult for me to follow the call of the Lord to Carmel.»<sup>58</sup>

M. Frances' commitment to God and neighbor was grounded on the Christologic agape with which she kept a strong connection that influenced her apostolic activities. If we read her letters, we can clearly see how the Christologic reality recurs in her experience and words. For instance, in her letters to Fr. Jordan we find: Christ (19 times), Jesus Chris (once), Lord (446 times, almost all of them applied to Christ), the Bridegroom (twice), Redeemer (56 times), Savior (13 times), Lamb (twice).

Through the Incarnation, God descended into what is poorest and disregarded, and M. Frances chose to live the mystery of this poverty, serving the humblest, the poorest, and accepting Christ's poverty often despised by those that should love it the most (priests and religious people).

«Do not be deterred by the rough external aspect of this pearl. (Poverty) Once it is recognized in its interior worth, the soul espoused to it considers it so dear that everything about it appears attractive. One certainly can, one must, excuse the true lover of this princess of heaven if he even seems to go a little too far in demonstrating love for his bride. But that is the sign of true love, if we so adapt to the object of our love that we are one with him, so that we are not ashamed to practice what sees contemptible to others.»<sup>59</sup>

She considered Jesus “the divine Master Builder” who, in His school of suffering<sup>60</sup>, molded her and prepared her to “*accomplish the task which the eternal Mercy demands of me*”<sup>61</sup>.

In the school of the Crucified Christ, M. Frances experienced the inner tension, typical of the saints who look to heaven with desire as a place of full communion with God, but, imitating Christ, are available to serve the weakest on earth with joy and alacrity. God's holy will had the absolute priority over every wish, even when this meant giving up a more contemplative lifestyle of prayer, penance, and solitude. In the light of the Spirit, she realized that, for her, to follow Christ and do His will meant to unite *action* (active service for the neighbor) and *contemplation* (prayer and union with God). In other words, M. Frances of the Cross was offered the task in the Church to

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<sup>58</sup> See Letter of M. Frances of the Cross to Fr. Jordan, December 11, 1883, pp. 202-203, par. 3.

<sup>59</sup> See Letter of M. Frances of the Cross to Fr. Jordan, June 25, 1883, p. 118, par. 3.

<sup>60</sup> See Letter of M. Frances of the Cross to Fr. Jordan, July 12, 1883, p. 124, par. 3.

<sup>61</sup> See Letter of M. Frances of the Cross to Fr. Jordan, February 26, 1883, p. 46, par. 1.

live and carry out the Gospel in solitude and prayer, but also among the human beings of her time, becoming neighbor to the poor, the sinners, the last.

In her vocational journey, she lived again Christ's mystery witnessing God's love that is offered to every human being, and realizing in her life the words of the Lord which call to full communion with Him in serving: «Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be.» (Jn 12:26)

## **7. Mary, Mother of Fair Love**

At this point, it is necessary to mention that M. Frances understood that where Jesus Christ was, there was also His Mother. The Blessed Virgin Mary was a firm presence in M. Frances' charismatic experience, and she saw Her in the light of Her *spiritual maternity* upon mankind. In particular, M. Frances enhanced Mary's *maternal mediation* through which the Mother of the Lord introduces the soul of the faithful to Christ. Behind this attitude of love and devotion, M. Frances was also aware of the importance of the Mother of the Lord for the Church life because of Her role in the salvific economy. For this reason, M. Frances addressed her with every sort of prayer and plea, invoking Her through the many titles typical of the Church tradition.

In her letters, M. Frances described Mary as she who leads the faithful to the source of the Divine love, to the holy mountain of God, thus personifying the same effective guide anticipated by Moses (Acts 3:15; see Acts 7:36.38). Together with the Holy Spirit, the Virgin Mary is considered the powerful guide that leads to Christ.

The fecundity of Mary as Mother of the Church manifests itself when the faithful are reborn in Christ, when they own Christ as *the bride owns the groom*, when God dwells in man's heart. Mary leads to the union with Christ, the *Fair Love* of which She is the mother:

«May our Mother of Fair Love<sup>62</sup> lead us profoundly into the mystery of the love of God, and may we, like her, stand firm under the cross. May the Precious

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<sup>62</sup>Desideriamo soffermarci sul senso del titolo *Maria Vergine Madre del Bell'Amore* dato alla Beata Vergine dalla stessa tradizione ecclesiale. Nel Messale Romano (ed. 1962), in vigore fino alla promulgazione del Messale rinnovato secondo le norme del Concilio Vaticano II (ed. 1970), nella sezione intitolata *Pro aliquibus locis*, alla data 9 maggio (un tempo 31 maggio), si trova una messa della *beata Vergine Maria Regina di tutti i santi e Madre del Bell'Amore* (pp. 157-158). L'espressione «madre del puro amore» si trova nel Siracide 24,24. «Io sono la madre del bell'amore e del timore, della conoscenza e della santa speranza» -, e dal secolo X è usata frequentemente nelle messe in onore della

Blood of Jesus Christ<sup>63</sup> be the balm of salvation so that through it, as purified members of Christ we may appear before God.»<sup>64</sup>

*To be with Mary and like Mary* means to fully accept God's love which manifests itself in the Son, from the *Incarnation* to the *Paschal Mystery*; it means to conform to Him thanks to the essential help by Mary who is hope, comfort, advice, guide, and model to every faithful on the way to redemption. The Mother of God is seen in Her *consoling presence*, in Her being *mother of all men, Virgin, Sorrowful, Handmaid, Bride, Queen, Virgin consecrated to God, poor insomuch as to receive everything from God*, etc. For this reason, M. Frances was inspired to entrust to Her the journey of the Institute. In relation to the new foundation, she invoked Her through these names: *Mother, Mother of God, Sorrowful, Mother of the Institute, Mother of Fair Love, Mother with maternal heart, Mother of the Seven Sorrows, the only Mother, Mother of all graces, Beloved Mother, Divine Mother, Mediatrix, Protectress, Mantle, Guide, and Model*<sup>65</sup>.

In accepting fully the salvific plan, M. Frances could not help acknowledging the position of Mary in the mystery of Christ and of the Church, because such a relation belongs to the logic of the Incarnation of the Redemption. The meditation on Jn 19:25-27, where Mary is described under the Cross in the act of accepting the new maternity that the Son is giving Her, led M. Frances and her sisters to imitate the *beloved disciple* in recognizing Mary's spiritual maternity as an essential help to open to the gift of a new life in Christ.

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Madonna. La Chiesa, celebrando il mistero e la funzione della beata Vergine Maria, secondo la tradizione sia orientale che occidentale, contempla con gioia la sua bellezza spirituale. La bellezza e lo splendore della santità e della verità di Dio, «fonte dell'eterna bellezza» (See Colletta 2) ed anche immagine della bontà e della fedeltà di Cristo, il più bello «tra i figli degli uomini» (Colletta 1; Sal 44 [45], 3). La beata Vergine per tre motivi è detta «bella», cioè amabile e pura: perché, essendo «piena di grazia» (Vangelo, Lc 1, 28) e «arricchita dei doni dello Spirito» (Colletta 3), «è rivestita della gloria del Figlio e adornata di ogni virtù» (Colletta 2); perché nel modo più puro amò appassionatamente Dio, il suo mirabile Figlio e tutti gli uomini, di un amore cioè verginale, sponsale e materno; perché fu splendidamente partecipe del mistero della concezione e della nascita di Cristo, nonché della sua morte e risurrezione (See Prefazio), aderendo con la dolcezza e la forza dell'amore in perfetta sintonia al disegno salvifico di Dio. Per celebrare la bellezza spirituale di santa Maria, il formulario usa figure e immagini, bibliche e patristiche, spesso proposte dalla sacra liturgia. Nella Vergine Maria che è «tutta bella» e «senza macchia» (See Salmo Responsoriale, Ct 4, 7), si trovano, portate a perfezione, le egregie virtù delle donne dell'Antico Testamento: la bellezza e l'amore della Sposa, del Cantico (cfr Antifona d'ingresso 2, Ct 6,10; Salmo Responsoriale); la bellezza e la saggezza di Giuditta (See Antifona alla Comunione 1, Gdt 11, 21); lo splendore e la grazia della Regina, sposa del Re messianico (See Antifona alla Comunione 2, Sal 44[45], 3). La «via della bellezza» è il cammino della perfezione cristiana; i fedeli che la percorrono «insieme con Maria» (Orazione sulle offerte) sono aiutati «a progredire nella, via del santo amore» (Orazione dopo la Comunione) e si rivolgono a Dio, «perché ripudiando la turpitudine del peccato (si innamorino) della bellezza incorruttibile» (Colletta 3). See <http://www.maranatha.it/Messale> BVM/coverpage.htm.

<sup>63</sup>See 1Pt 1:19.

<sup>64</sup>Letter of M. Frances of the Cross to Hedwig Streitel, July 11, 1898, p. 55, par. 7.

<sup>65</sup>Per la formulazione di parte di questo paragrafo ci siamo ispirati alla tesi di Magistero di M.R. PORCU, .

## **Conclusion: M. Frances of the Cross in the Church of Her Time**

The horizon of the divine plan involved a *humble woman* of the nineteenth century, and submerged her in the love of God's infinite You, calling her to follow a path that was divine and human at the same time, in order to love every man with the same love of Christ. M. Frances became, in this way, a *sign of contradiction* in a historical-cultural-social context in which the Church was called to defend her reality before the modern society. It was a time marked by the isolation of the religious world because of anti-clerical movements, socialist, modern, and liberal doctrines<sup>66</sup>, laicism, and atheist philosophy.

M. Frances' spiritual experience shows that, even in a century in which the reference to the transcendent was strongly hindered, the Spirit was able to generate "Saints" blessed with a capability to read the "signs of new times," to give, based on the divine light, appropriate answers by the Church to the contemporary challenges<sup>67</sup>.

Mary Frances of the Cross lived fully her historical time, and nurtured worries about people tearing away from God in the modern times. She also suffered for society and culture's inability to find the truth and the sense of human existence<sup>68</sup>.

Besides, in the light of social, political, and cultural events, she understood the undeniable difficulty of the Church to begin a useful dialogue with these new challenges, considering, at the same time, how this new situation implied a Christian community interiorly renewed. Therefore, she wanted to listen to the voice of the Spirit to incarnate a Christian lifestyle that strived for a

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<sup>66</sup> In respect of Liberalism, John Henry Newman, contemporaneous with M. Frances, in his famous *Biglietto Speech* pronounced when he was created cardinal, stated: «It must be borne in mind, that there is much in the liberalistic theory which is good and true; for example, not to say more, the precepts of justice, truthfulness, sobriety, self-command, benevolence, which, as I have already noted, are among its avowed principles, and the natural laws of society. It is not till we find that this array of principles is intended to supersede, to block out, religion, that we pronounce it to be evil.» Ripreso da "La Civiltà Cattolica" n. 3849, 6 novembre 2010, Anno 161, 227-231.

<sup>67</sup> See L. BORIELLO, *La spiritualità cristiana nell'età contemporanea*, Borla, Roma 1985, 80-86; S. XERES, *La Chiesa corpo inquieto. Due mila anni di storia sotto il segno della Riforma*, Ancora, Milano 2003; L. DATTRINO-M.P. MONTEMURRO, *Un popolo in cammino. Lineamenti di storia della Chiesa*. Vol. 3, *L'età contemporanea*, Edizioni Messaggero, Padova 2005; G. MARTINA, *La Chiesa nell'età dell'Assolutismo, del Liberalismo, del Totalitarismo*. Vol 3. *L'età del Liberalismo*, Morcelliana, Brescia 1988<sup>7</sup>; ID., *La Chiesa nell'età dell'Assolutismo, del Liberalismo, del Totalitarismo*. Vol 4. *L'età del totalitarismo*, Morcelliana, Brescia 1989<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>68</sup> Scrivendo a P. Jordan, la Streitel riflette: «We are standing at a spiritual crisis similar to that of the sixteenth century, which is called the century of saints but which, on the other hand, can also be called the century of rebellion against God and the divine law. The nineteenth century represents both extremes: on the one hand, a striving for perfection in self-annihilation and penitential rigor; on the other hand, an aspiring for vainglory and false greatness, even in persons whose obligation would be to serve the Lord in a special manner in humility and self-denial; a self-glorification concerning things that are simply and solely a denial of revealed eternal truths, even a denial of the personal God Himself. One desires sinful liberty, proudly tears himself away from God, saying "I will not serve you" drags all civil order with him, and delivers himself, soul and body, to eternal perdition.» (Letter of M. Frances of the Cross to Fr. Jordan, March 25, 1883, p. 88, par. 2.)

reforming commitment directed to serious renewal of religious, presbyteral, and laical life of that time.

She found support in her commitment, thanks to the formation previously received by the German Catholicism of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In terms of spiritual and theological renewal, it owed much to a group of theologians belonging to the so-called *Munich Circle*. This last was born around Munich University which, under the guidance of the lay philosopher Franz von Baader, of the theologian Johann Adam Möhler, and of the professor in Pastoral Theology Johann Michales Sailer offered “the ground for many movements of renewal in Germany after the Enlightenment and secularization.”<sup>69</sup>

The ideas of the scholar of Christian mysticism Joseph von Görres (the heart of the *Munich Circle*) and of the *Munich Circle* itself played a decisive role for the future activity of the Servant of God in the areas of pastoral care and formation of the people. In this circle of Catholic renewal, M. Frances received instructions about the interconnection and interdependence between religion and identity of the people, between Church and State, between work, life, and religiosity upon which she reflected quite often. In this environment, M. Frances came to know the different currents of Catholic renewal from which she received her first knowledge of a Christian renewal movement<sup>70</sup> which was crucial during the years of the *Kulturkampf* that in 1870s –1890s was in its decisive phase<sup>71</sup>.

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<sup>69</sup>I suoi effetti dal punto di vista socio-politico non rimasero circoscritti all’Europa. Quest’università, fondata nel 1472 ad Ingolstadt ed inaugurata a Monaco nel 1826 - dopo un trasferimento di due anni a Landshut dal 1800 al 1802 - contribuì in maniera essenziale a far diventare questa città un centro della cultura e della scienza tedesca ed europea del XIX secolo.

<sup>70</sup>“La Sera di Dio frequentò in questi ambienti vari corsi catechetici. (See *Novissima Positio, Relatio et Vota sulla seduta dei Consultori Storici tenuta il 24 febbraio 2004*, vol. III, 42). Va inoltre detto che specialmente l’opera «La mistica cristiana», nella quale Joseph von Görres aveva cercato di risolvere i contrasti tra scienza naturale e teologia con una dottrina di armonia fra corpo e spirito, aveva avuto una vasta diffusione ed un effetto marcato in ambito teologico-spirituale (See ID., *Die christliche Mystik*, 5 voll., Verlag von G.-J. Manz, Regensburg 1836-1840).

<sup>71</sup>«Dopo la fondazione dell’impero nel 1871 si sviluppò in Prussia e nell’intero impero tedesco tra Stato e Chiesa cattolica il conflitto *Kulturkampf* - chiamata lotta per la civiltà. Ne fu protagonista il cancelliere Otto von Bismarck, appoggiato dai liberali, i quali vedevano nella lotta per la civiltà non solo una politica di abolizione dei privilegi ecclesiastici, ma l’affermazione del concetto positivistico e laicistico di «cultura». Preso avvio dalla proclamazione del dogma dell’Infallibilità, culminò nel maggio con la legge, per cui sia le gerarchie ecclesiastiche, sia gli istituti religiosi venivano sottoposti al controllo statale. La politica del *Kulturkampf* a cominciare dal 1877 venne progressivamente meno a causa dell’avvento di Leone XIII sul soglio pontificio e la necessità per Bismarck di trattare con il partito cattolico *Zentrum*. See L. BORRIELLO - G. DELLA CROCE - B. SECONDI, *La spiritualità*, 84-86.

The encounter in the Church with Christ's mystery developed during her life gave M. Frances the right inspiration and maturity for an effective witness of sanctity in facing the new instances of the modern world through a life of prayer and apostolic activity. The new foundation that she started found inspiration for its guidelines in the message of St. Francis of Assisi. Such a foundation remains the manner through which God called her to contribute to the renewal of the Church, to the promotion of the human being, to the spiritual growth of God's people and of those who were far away from the faith.

Today, the Church has declared her venerable, acknowledging her contribution of sanctity on benefit of humanity and of the ecclesiastical body.